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AUTHOR Anderson-Levitt, Kathryn M.; Hertweck, Alma
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ABSTRACT

Nearly parallel studies in two different cultural settings are compared. The interpretations teachers make of students' classroom behavior was the aspect of teacher cognition discussed. One study took place in southern California while the other was done in west central France. The participation of "problem" and "non-problem" students during ordinary lessons was videotaped. In American classrooms, "problem" students were children whom teachers had previously referred to the district as candidates for special education. In French classrooms, "problem" students were those who would be required to repeat a grade, students whom teachers would refer to special education classes, or those who were promoted only with strong reservations. The preliminary results indicated categories teachers use in judging students are not bound by considerations specific to local classrooms or cultures. Teachers' interpretations of individual students' behaviors are tailored to the child and the specific situation in which the interpretation takes place. There was a discrepancy between the perceptions of teachers viewing videotaped sequences of classroom behavior and those of an independent panel of judges. (DWH)

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Teachers' Interpretations of Students' Behaviors
in French and American Classrooms

Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt (UCLA)

and

Alma Hertweck (UCSD)

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Introduction

In recent years, many educational researchers have turned their attention to teachers' thought processes (Shavelson and Stern 1981). We report here on our investigation of one aspect of teacher cognition, the interpretations teachers make of their students' behaviors in the classroom. The information in this report comes from two studies which were initially conducted separately. Here we are taking the first step toward comparing what turned out to be nearly parallel studies in two different cultural settings.

Hertweck (1982), as part of a larger study of educational decision making (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn 1981), asked elementary school teachers from a southern California school district to explain why they had referred one or more students from their classroom for special education. Twenty-seven teachers who had referred 55 students agreed to participate. After explaining their referral reasons, the teachers watched videotapes of representative events in their classrooms, and were asked to comment on the videotaped behaviors of students who had been referred and students who had not been referred. Hertweck analyzed the teachers' discourse to determine their categories for success and failure and to determine their perceptions of instances of those categories.

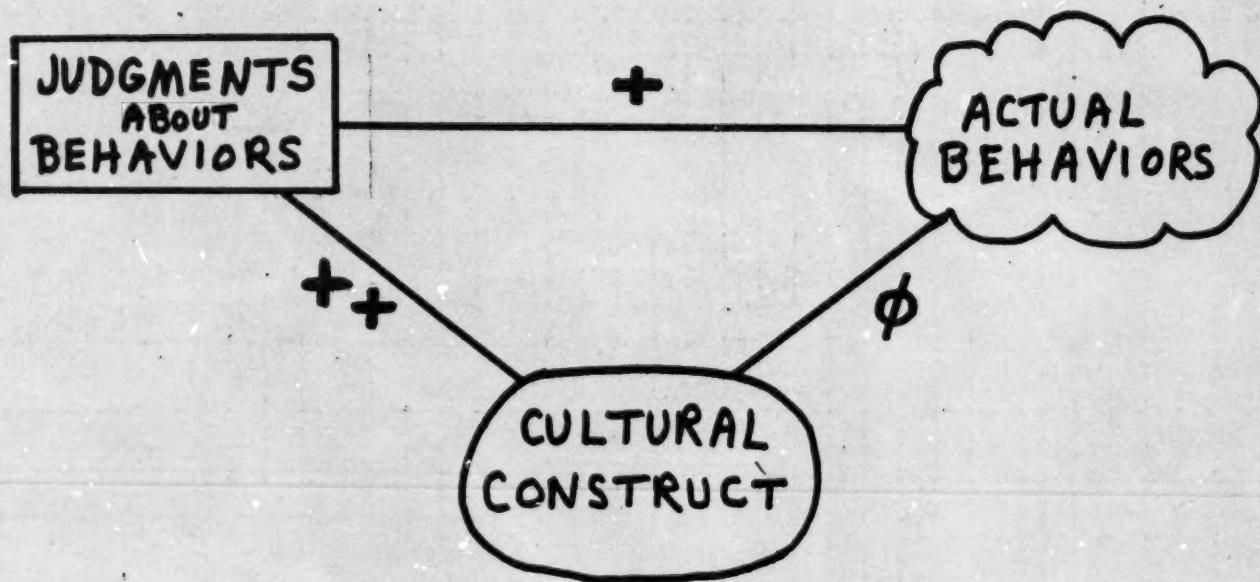
Anderson-Levitt (1982) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three first grade classrooms in a city in west central France. Her study, like Hertweck's, took place during the 1978-79 school year. Anderson-Levitt aimed to identify the criteria by which the French teachers recognized success and failure in learning to read. She, too, elicited from each teacher the categories the teacher used to mark "problem" students and she, too, conducted "viewing sessions" in which the teachers commented about students' behaviors in videotapes of representative classroom events.

When we learned about each other's work, we decided to attempt a cross-cultural comparison of teachers' ways of thinking and talking about "problem" students. The way in which each study had been conducted facilitated this comparison. Both studies were ethnographic in nature. We had "thick descriptions" of our research sites which enabled us to re-analyze our data asking new and different questions. We had videotapes of actual classroom situations which permitted re-viewing and re-analysis. In both studies, we had conducted "viewing sessions" with the same teachers who had been observed, interviewed, and videotaped.

As we make this comparison, we are interested in the relationships among actual behavior, people's judgments, and cultural constructs. In terms of our particular data, we want to understand the connections among students' behaviors as coded during on-going observation, the ways teachers interpret and evaluate students' performances, and cultural systems of ideas which may inform the teachers' interpretations.

D'Andrade (1974) and Shweder (1975) have explored these relationships with respect to cultural constructs about personality (notions of what kinds of behaviors "go together"). For example, in a re-analysis of a study using Bales' interaction code, D'Andrade demonstrated that the correlation between persons' actual behavior as coded on the spot and raters' judgments of that behavior based on long-term memory was not particularly strong. At the same time, he showed a much stronger correlation between those raters' judgments of behavior and the independent judgments made by a different group of people regarding what behaviors are like others (1974:162-168). Figure 1 represents the relative

Figure 1. Strength of Relationships in D'Andrade's Model

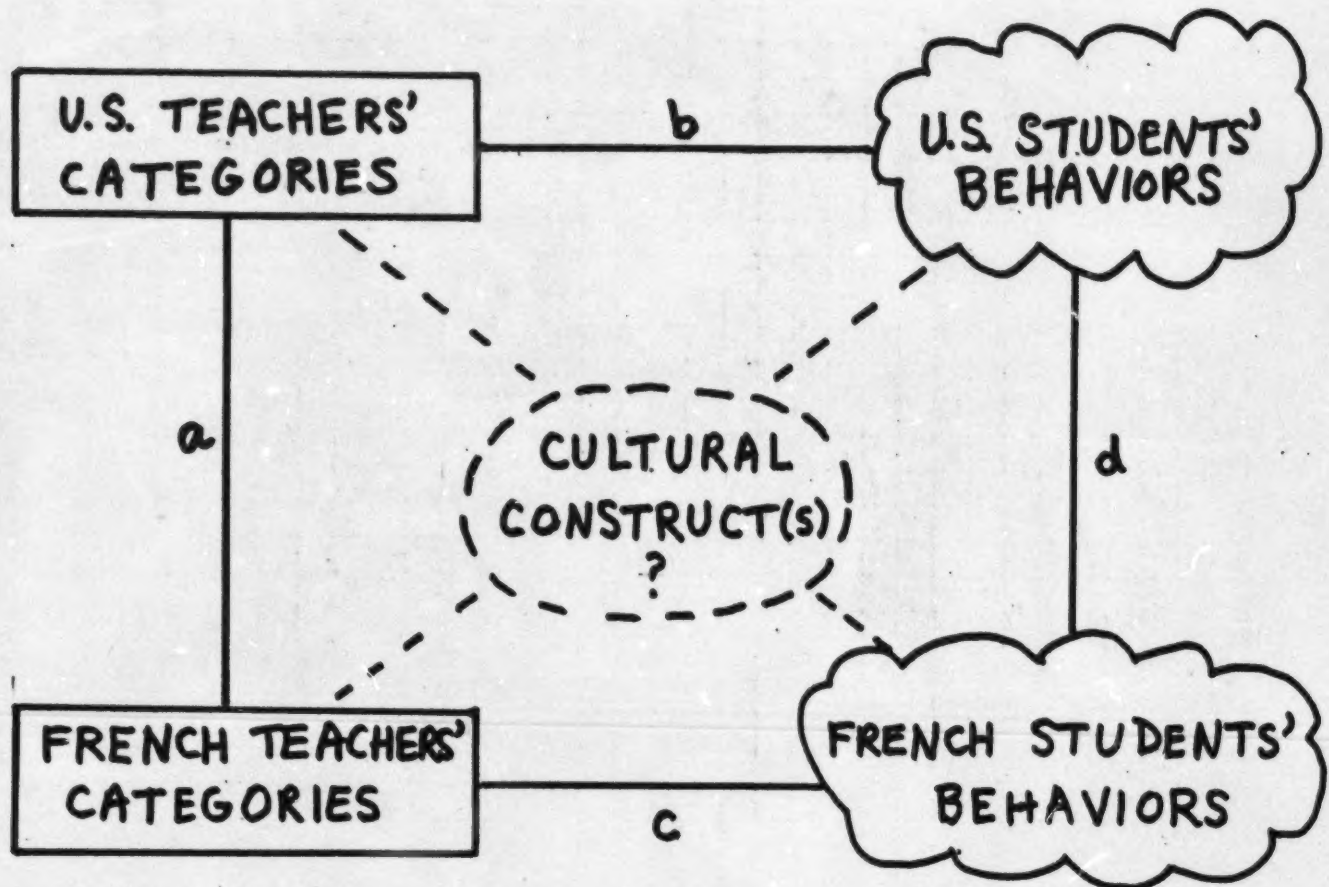


strength of these relationships. In short, D'Andrade and Shweder argue that generalizations about a particular person's behavior reflect cultural ideas more than the actual behavior (cf. Cantor and Mischel 1977; Chapman 1967).

Comparison of the data from our two studies will permit investigation of certain issues raised by D'Andrade's model. Eventually, we hope to make a four-way comparison, as sketched in Figure 2. The left side of the figure represents the information we have about categories teachers use in France and in the United States when they judge particular students' performances. The right side of the figure represents our records of actual student behavior in both the French and the American teachers' classrooms. The term "cultural construct(s)" in the middle of Figure 2 is merely speculative at this point. We have not made independent assessments of any system of ideas which French teachers might share, or American teachers might share, or both groups of teachers might share with each other. We have placed the term inside our four-sided comparison simply to suggest the relationship between this model and D'Andrade's: The inverted triangle with line b as its base and the upright triangle with line c as its base both correspond to the three-way relationship studied by D'Andrade. While we do not plan to make a direct measure of cultural constructs, we believe our study of relationships a and d, projected below, will result in indirect information about the system of ideas teachers are hypothesized to share.

Taken together, comparisons b and c determine the extent to which teachers' judgments are linked to actual student behaviors. These relationships have already been examined in independent reports (Hertweck 1982; Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn 1981; Anderson-Levitt 1982), and are analyzed further in the next section of this paper. In general, we

Figure 2. Model for Four-Way Comparison



have found the link between teachers' accounts of problem behaviors and the behaviors themselves to be relatively weak and inconsistent, because of the nature of everyday thinking and the complex task facing the teacher.

The weakness of relationships b and c already points to a cultural construct or constructs as one possible source of teachers' interpretations of students' behaviors. But what is the nature of the system of ideas which may shape a teacher's schema for teaching and thus his interpretation of a student's performance? Is it a cultural construct for person perception which "belongs" to what is generally thought of as the teacher's "native" culture, e.g., "French culture," "American culture"? Or is there a system of ideas shared by the teacher not with fellow French or fellow Americans, but with teaching colleagues across national boundaries? Examination of relationship a, which we initiate in the third section of this paper, will help answer these questions. If the connection is weak--that is, if French teachers' ways of talking about "problem" students differ markedly from American teachers' ways of talking--we will have evidence that teachers' judgments about students are bound by local context. If, on the other hand, we find a strong relationship between French and American teachers' accounts, we will suspect the existence of a "culture of teaching" which transcends local context.

Evidence for the existence of a "teaching culture" would suggest further stages for research. First, we must consider that if French and American teachers use similar categories, perhaps there is a basic similarity in the way French and American students behave in class which leads

teachers to develop the same general vocabulary for describing students' performances. This possibility, analogous to Mulaik's argument as reported by Shweder (1975:457-58), requires analysis of relationship d in our model. We would have to risk an attempt at comparing videotaped samples of students' behaviors in French and American classrooms. Strong similarities in the way French and American students displayed "behavior problems," "inability to decode," "immaturity," or other hypothetical shared categories would suggest that the categories are grounded in the students' behaviors. Strong differences would require that we look elsewhere for an explanation of why American and French teachers shared the same basic "culture of teaching."

In the latter eventuality--if French and American teachers' accounts of behavior are similar but the specifics of their students' behaviors differ--we would have to pursue our cross-cultural investigations beyond the current data. We would want to understand whether the hypothetical "culture of teaching" originated in the common history of Western schools some centuries ago, or whether it is independently re-invented by teachers in different societies, Western and non-Western. This question could be studied by comparing our French and American teachers and classrooms to their counterparts in non-Western settings for formal schooling, e.g., Soviet schools, Japanese schools, or the Koran schools of Africa or Southeast Asia.

Teachers' Interpretations of Students' Behaviors

This section summarizes what we know about the link between teachers' accounts of problem students and students' actual behaviors (relationships b and c). The data come from the "viewing sessions," in which teachers were asked to point to instances of problem behaviors which they had discussed with the researcher earlier (in Anderson-Levitt's study) or had listed on official school records (in Hertweck's study). Here we are discussing not only teachers' judgments based on long-term memory (their prior statements about problem behaviors in particular students), but their judgments of on-going student behavior, as recorded in the videotapes. One would expect teachers' on-the-spot interpretations to conform more closely to actual behavior than judgments based on memory.

In both the French and the American classrooms, we videotaped the participation of "problem" and non-"problem" students during ordinary lessons. In the American case, the term "problem" student identifies children whom the teacher had previously referred to the district as candidates for special education. In the French case, the "problem" students were those whom the teacher would require to repeat the grade at the end of the year, those occasional students whom the teacher would refer to special education classes, or those students whom the teacher allowed to pass to the next grade only with strong reservations.

The teacher's identifications (by commenting or pointing) of students' "problem" behaviors during the viewing sessions was juxtaposed to an independent analysis of the taped classroom events.

For Hertweck's data, a three-person panel, and for Anderson-Levitt's data, a four-person panel conducted the independent analysis. (Hertweck was a member of both panels, and the panel for the latter study included a native French speaker.) In these analyses, the teacher's prior statements about "problem" behaviors were used as a template or "emic grid" to guide the panel in identifying all the instances of "problem" behavior within the videotaped sequence. That is, the videotape of each classroom was analyzed in terms of that classroom teacher's categories of "problem" behavior.

Table 1 summarizes the results of this comparison in Hertweck's focused study of seven American teachers. All teachers except one (Teacher 3) identified more "problem" behaviors in referral students than they did for non-referral students observed during the viewing sessions. Indeed, three of the teachers did not identify any "problem" behaviors at all in non-referral students, although the independent panel of observers located a number of "problem" behaviors as defined by the teacher for non-referral students in each class. These American teachers identified 46.4% as many "problem" behaviors for referral students as the independent observers identified--which seems a very high rate, since the teachers generally watched the tapes only once while the independent panel rewatched them many times. However, the American teachers identified only 13.9% as many "problem" behaviors as the panel identified in non-referral students.

Table 2 presents parallel data for two of the French teachers studied by Anderson-Levitt. Like the American teachers, the French teachers identified many more inappropriate behaviors displayed by students they considered "problems" than they identified for students they considered to be progressing normally. The two French teachers

Table 1

American Teachers' Identification of "Problem" Behaviors

	REFERRED STUDENTS			NON-REFERRED STUDENTS		
	Instances of Behavior on tape ^a	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage	Instances of Behavior on tape ^a	Instances of behavior identified by teacher	Percentage
Teacher 2	29	10	34.5	19	0	0
Teacher 3	98	23	23.5	8	8	100
Teacher 5	22	14	63.4	3	0	0
Teacher 8	27	40	148	12	3	25
Teacher 11	43	12	27.9	26	0	0
Teacher 15	7	8	114	6	3	50
Teacher 17	28	11	39.3	29	1	3
Total	254	118	(46.4%)	108	15	(13.9%)

^aAs identified by independent panel of observers.

Table 2

French Teachers' Identification of "Problem" Behaviors

	<u>"PROBLEM" STUDENTS</u>			<u>"NORMAL" STUDENTS</u>		
	Instances of behavior ^a on tape	Instances of behavior identi- fied by teacher	Percentage	Instances of behavior ^a on tape	Instances of behavior identi- fied by teacher	Percentage
Madame D	10	4	40	1	0	0
Madame M	6	6	100	3	0	0
Total	16	10	(62.5%)	4	0	(0%)

^a As identified by independent panel of observers.

considered together identified 62.5% as many "problem" behaviors as the panel did for "problem" students, but none for normal students.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that teachers do not interpret video sequences of their students' behaviors in a mechanical or computer-like fashion. The teachers considered here paid selective attention to students in whom they had a special interest, notably students previously identified as "problems." While it is true that the independent panels also identified more "problem" behaviors in "problem" students than in normal students, the teachers exaggerated this difference in their comments about the taped lessons.

In fact, the figures in the tables disguise the degree of discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions and the panels' perceptions of the video sequences. Although the viewing panel might identify some of the behaviors noted by the teachers as problem behaviors, teachers typically commented on additional behaviors which they saw as problematic. In addition, the viewing panel might identify a behavior as problematic which the teacher did not identify or vice versa. In fact, in most cases for the two French teachers--the teachers and the panels did not identify the same incidents as instances of problem behavior. One of the French teachers identified the problem behavior of "repeating after the others" in a problem student during a video sequence in which the panel failed to locate that or any problem behavior in the child. In a particularly dramatic example, Madame D, after complaining that a certain student's problem was the inability to "decode," watched the student read a syllable on the monitor without commenting. When the ethnographer asked whether the student hadn't "decoded," Madame D was able to explain how the student had actually recognized the syllable as a globally memorized small word rather than sounding it out. Anderson-Levitt (1982), Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and

Flynn (1982) and Hertweck (1982) give other examples of discrepancies between the teachers' interpretations and other observers' perceptions of the videotaped lessons.

Those discrepancies suggest that the teachers' comments during the viewing sessions cannot be explained simply as cases of selective attention. We have argued elsewhere that the teachers, in the context of their social interaction with the researchers, were seeking to "account for" previously expressed, individualized theories about "problem" students (Anderson-Levitt 1981)--that they were attending to the students' "actions in context" rather than to isolated behaviors (Hertweck, 1982; Hertweck and Mehan, 1981; Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn, 1981). As one part, and only one part, of that process we believe there are "categories that the teacher brings to the interaction" (Mehan, Hertweck, Combs and Flynn, 1981), a general teaching schema (Anderson-Levitt, 1981) which aids the teacher in organizing an interpretation of a student's behavior.

Teachers' Categories for Students' Problems

To begin to explore the fit of the French teachers' comments within the categories emerging from the American teachers' comments (Hertweck, 1982), we selected two first-grade teachers from Hertweck's study to match the two teachers from Anderson-Levitt's study. The four teachers' specific comments about specific students showed considerable diversity. Yet within this diversity, common themes emerge.

In her specific comments, American teacher Mrs. A noted the way a problem student messes up his paper by drawing on it even when told to stop, the way he hits other children, and the way he uses "bad language." American teacher Mrs. B lists less concrete learning problems, including her student's inability to "sequence," poor auditory memory, and limited

vocabulary. French teacher Madame D includes lack of participation in class, language problems, and inability to "decode" among the signs of problems in particular children, while Madame M mentions inability to pay attention, copying from neighbors, and lack of self-confidence, among other indicators.

There were a few close parallels in the teachers' accounts of problem behaviors. For instance, Mrs. B said that her problem student "can't learn sounds," Madame M mentioned two boys who had not yet mastered simple vowel sounds, and Madame D identified one child's problem as the inability to "decode." In another rough parallel, Madame D remarked about a student that she works only when the teacher works with her, and Madame M complained about students who needed her help rather than being able to work by themselves. Mrs. B, citing a more specific classroom situation, said of her problem child that he required "patterning," the aid of the teacher tracing with her finger while he read. Finally, Mrs. B mentioned her problem student's "distraction," and Madame D said that one child was "never there." Madame M noted two students who wouldn't "follow" if she let them out of her sight, and another who paid attention only "every five minutes."

At a broader level of generality, greater similarity seemed to appear. In an earlier study, Hertweck (1982) demonstrated that a group of fifteen American teachers, though they taught at different grade levels in different schools and were speaking of children referred to different programs, all talked about students' academic difficulties in similar ways. The majority of their comments concerned the broad categories of students' ability, students' behavior in class, students' psychological

state, others traits of the student, or students' cognitive focus (i.e., paying or not paying attention). For the twenty categories into which Hertweck coded the teachers' comments, there was statistically significant agreement on the rank order of the frequency with which different categories were used (Hertweck 1982:164). We have not yet analyzed the French teachers' comments with the precision which Hertweck applied to the analysis of these American teachers' remarks; therefore, we cannot make a direct comparison. However, inspection of the French teachers' comments strongly suggests they they share the same types of concerns as the American teachers and suggests that their descriptions could be coded into the same twenty categories developed by Hertweck (1982). Any particular teacher, French or American, may place emphasis on two or three or four general categories for explaining students who have trouble in class, but it appears that each teacher's categories form a subset drawn from the same broad set of themes (Cf. Hertweck, 1982).

The most striking common theme in the teachers' accounts of problems concerned the source of origin of students' difficulties. Findings from this study support Hertweck's (1982) findings concerning American teachers' attributions to internal factors. Teachers from west central France and southern California overwhelmingly attributed students' academic and classroom difficulties to factors internal to the student. School problems are treated as if they are the student's personal and private possession. This is a prime example of the use of dispositional properties in the search for an explanation of other people's behavior (Cantor and Mischel, 1979; D'Andrade, 1974; Shweder, 1975).

Conclusion

Our preliminary comparison points to a commonality in the ways teachers account for students' problems. As mentioned, Hertweck (1982) has already shown that American teachers, discussing children at different grade levels in different schools, draw from a single set of themes in explaining a student's academic and classroom difficulties. While the present study is only a small pilot which does not permit much beyond speculation, it does seem to suggest that the range of similarity is even wider, encompassing two cultures. We expect further comparison will confirm that the categories teachers use in judging students are not bound by considerations specific to the local classroom or culture. The categories seem to be part of a system of beliefs and values which is divorced from association with one particular locale or even one particular society (cf. Goodenough 1971).

At the same time, we are acutely aware that teachers' specific interpretations of specific students are embedded in their particular context. Indeed, we believe it is this embeddedness in the particular situation which explains the diversity among the teachers' accounts of problems at the specific level, as well as the discrepancies between the teachers' remarks during viewing sessions and the panels' perceptions of the videotapes. Teachers tailor their interpretations of individual students to the child and to the situation in which the interpretation takes place. The theories they construct about their particular students' problems are unique and context-bound; the building blocks of those theories are not.

In The Savage Mind, Lévi-Strauss describes human thinkers as bricoleurs, handymen who construct myths and meanings out of odds and ends, whatever material is "at hand." People, he argues, use a set of tools and materials which is finite, and which (like Rube Goldberg's building materials) may bear no relation to the finished product (1966:16-22). When teachers construct an interpretation of a student, they operate as any human thinker does--they grope among a limited number of building blocks, a finite "stock of knowledge at hand," a bounded set of "recipes, rules of thumb, social types, maxims and definitions" (Leiter 1980). But because the old, familiar cultural constructs have an "open horizon of meaning" (Schutz 1962)--because categories like "needing help from the teacher," "saying anything," and "inability to sequence" are ambiguous enough to shift in meaning depending on the context in which they are applied--teachers are able to construct new, sometimes unexpected interpretations of classroom behavior (cf. Anderson-Levitt 1982).

In the long run, we hope to understand the processes by which teachers fit together cultural constructs to develop particular judgments. For the moment, though, we have paused to investigate the nature of those constructs, on the hunch that they will reveal something about the nature of success and failure in the classroom.

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